QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

January 11, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Matthew 3:13-17
Ephesians 1:3-6
Romans 8:28-30,38,39

"For I am sure that neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." --Romans 8:38,39 (RSV)

In the railroad town in Western Pennsylvania where I grew up, one of the local language peculiarities allows one to substitute, "What do you know?" for "Good morning" or "How are you?" Now, we all know that the traditional greeting "How are you this morning?" is not actually an inquiry into the multi-faceted well-being of the other. It is an attempt to be slightly more personal than the mere acknowledgement of the other's presence which is what "Hello" means. But not much. We have, in fact, asked another "How are you this morning?" and been distressed when the person actually begins to tell us. So, "What do you know?" may not be an actual inquiry into the status of one's intellectual certainties, but then again, it might be just that, because the prescribed answer, appropriate in the Pennsylvania town, when asked "What do you know," was "not much" or sometimes "not a thing."

I was reminded of all this by a Carl Sandburg vignette. Sandburg had a poet's gift for knowing the integrity of the language, in its simplest and sometimes crudest form. He traveled extensively by railroad, and he wrote:

"I have always enjoyed riding up front, in a smoking car, in a seat back of the 'deadheads,' the railroaders going back to home base. Their talk about each other runs free...Once I saw a young fireman in overalls take a seat and slouch down easy and comfortable. After a while a brakeman in a blue uniform came along and planted himself alongside the fireman. They didn't say anything. The two of them didn't even look at each other. Then the brakeman, looking straight ahead, was saying, 'Well, what do you know today?' and kept looking straight ahead, till suddenly he turned and stared the fireman in the face, adding, 'For sure.' I thought it was a keen and intelligent question. 'What do you know today - for sure?' I remember the answer. It came slow and honest. The fireman made it plain what he knew that day for sure: 'Not a damn thing.'"

(Cited by George Peters, Interpreting the Times, The Protestant Hour, What Do You Know For Sure?", p. 3.

What do you know for sure? Big city people don't use this idiom much, but of late, whenever I hear it, I wonder if it isn't an authentic inquiry, and I wonder whether the response isn't an accurate reflection of how we feel, or perhaps a kind of confession, or maybe a plea.."someone, tell me something for sure!"

We do live in a time which has made a scarcity of certainty. What do we know for sure? Not really very much: not nearly as much as people before us knew or thought they knew, and not nearly as much as we wish we knew. We do need some certainties. Apparently one of our very basic, very early, almost primal needs is for the certainty in infancy that there will be someone there. We know human personality suffers seriously when it is deprived of the certainty of regular human contact. The psychiatrists have taught us that our earliest fear has to do with the certainty of parental attention, dependability and care giving.

We need certainty. And we must live in a world and at a time which has been very hard on the certainties of the past. A lot of people I know were certain about what football team they would be watching this afternoon. Some were so certain they were already planning their January 25. More seriously, gone is the certainty with which people in the past looked into the night sky and saw the firmament, the inverted cup in which the stars were fixed. In its place is the fathomless cosmos of modern astrophysics, the universe, not fixed, but expanding - literally exploding outward at the speed of light. Gone is the pre-Darwinian certainty about where we came from and in its place the magnificent mystery of life evolving . Gone are the days when everybody at least understood what was right and what was wrong, swept away before the incredibly complex ethical dilemmas of the modern world. Who will live? Who will die? Who will manage the genetic engineering we are now preparing to perform?

John A. T. Robinson, in his little book, Honest to God, suggested that we have seen the end of "the stable state." Much of the literature of the past two decades has taught us that change is now the norm, not stability. And the casualty, for all of us, is certainty, the certainty upon which our parents and theirs built their lives.

I can recall vividly a conversation I had with my father during the Second World War. I asked him, "What if we lose?" I recall him saying, "We won't." I persisted. I asked again, and I recall his irritation: "What if we lose? We can't lose - and we won't lose." That was a certainty which has vanished in the age of nuclear weaponry and Star Wars technology. No one, sensibly or seriously, proposes that we will actually win a nuclear war.

Americans have been certain, always, that the future will be better than the past, that the next generation will enjoy a fuller, freer life than this generation. That has been a certainty, until now. We are the first generation not to believe it. We are the first generation for which it is not true. Our children will be the first Americans to have a more

difficult time than their parents, buying a home, an automobile and paying for education. It appears that our children will have to work very hard and devote most of their resources to pay our debts.

And so many turn to religion as a last bastion of certainty, or a substitute for the certainty which is under siege elsewhere. For all of us, religion is a reminder that in a world of change, there is something that doesn't change. But beyond that, there is an obvious appeal to a religion that is sure, that provides answers, that operates within a clear, predictable and dependable theological framework. One of the more helpful learning experiences I ever had about this matter occurred when I met, quite by chance, an old college friend, in fact the brightest college friend I had and one of the brightest I have ever known. He had earned a Phi Beta Kappa Key in his spare time, between varsity wrestling, campus politicking, and partying, at each of which he was very proficient. He has his PhD in Chemistry and an M.D. and was at the time doing highly specialized research in space medicine for NASA. To my utter surprise he had become a member of what I regard as a rigid religious sect. It was an arduous evening. In theological matters he had suspended the probing, scientific method which had served him so well. I asked him "Why?" He said simply "Because they gave me answers." And, in fact, he knew the answers; he had a lot of certainty.

John Updike's recent novel, Roger's Version, is, among other things, about religious certainty. A computer zealot on the campus of a an unnamed university in the East, which sounds like Harvard, comes to a professor at the Divinity School to talk about his proposal to prove the existence of God scientifically, on the University's computer. In fact, he assumes that the Divinity School will be interested in the project and give him a research grant. Roger is the Divinity School professor. The dialogue between them throughout the book deals with the matter of our need for certainty..particularly in religion. Dale, the computer student says: "If God created a universe, then as a fact it has to show. Let me put it another way. God can't hide anymore."

Roger answers, "If God is omnipotent, I would think it within his powers to keep hiding. And I'm not sure it isn't a bit heretical of you to toss the fact of God around like a lot of other facts... A God who can be hauled kicking and screaming out from some laboratory closet, over behind the blackboard.. A God you could prove makes the whole thing immensely uninteresting. Pat. Whatever else God should be, He shouldn't be pat." (Roger's Version, p. 21-24).

The witness of the Bible is that our need for certainty is inclined to get us in trouble, religiously, theologically. The testimony of the Bible is that human beings, in the absence of certainty, are inclined to create their own, and then adhere to it ferociously. That certainty often takes the form of religious custom or tradition: keeping the law, for instance. People - now - and then - arduously resist letting go of traditional religious certainties. The testimony of the Bible is that there are not a lot of things about which we can be certain. In fact, there is only one and that is the love of God. That is the theological bottom line and no one ever thought about it more strenuously than St. Paul. In point of fact, Paul's world, and the world in which the first

Christians lived, was also in the process of losing its certainties. For many of the first Christians the only certainty was persecution, suffering, death. Paul, himself, was under arrest, on his way to Rome for trial and probable execution. "I am certain," he wrote, "that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ."

What do you know for sure? Paul's answer was God's love. He also wrote:

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, and those whom he foreknew he predestined."

There it is. Predestination. Out in the open. On the way to declaring the one thing about which he was absolutely certain, namely God's love, Paul said some things that have troubled us deeply ever since, particularly those of us in the Presbyterian family. The world sometimes thinks that we are certain - sure of our chosenness, our election, because of the doctrine of predestination. Most of us aren't so sure at all.

Popularly, predestination is almost always confused with "determinism" or "fatalism," the notion that God wills everything that happens: that there is a master script somewhere and that life - all of life and your life in particular - is merely the playing out of the script. "Que sera sera -" What will be will be. It is a popular idea. It has been around for thousands of years. It is, in a strange way, a comfort, I suppose, to believe that whatever happens to one is God's doing, God's will. The story is told of the Scottish preacher who climbed the steep stairs to his pulpit, then stumbled and fell all the way back down in a heap. Standing up and smoothing his robes, he said, "I'm glad that is over."

Determinism may provide the comfort of certainty but it also must make some sense of the arson last week that claimed innocent lives, and the death of the man who was going forward in the Amtrak train to get his wife a cup of coffee. Determinism, I would submit, is a morally repugnant idea, contrary to the Biblical witness and to any sense of human freedom and responsibility. It is not what Paul meant - or what the Calvinists have meant by predestination.

On the topic of God's relationship to events in the world, Paul said something beautiful. "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him." That's a confession of faith. That's Paul looking back over his own life and seeing the presence of God leading, pushing, pulling, disturbing, disquieting, raising questions. The Apostle did not suggest that everything that happens is good, or that God arranged everything that happens. What he said was that "in everything God works for good." It is the suggestion that God uses even the tragic events to work for good. It is a personal confession, not that God has willed everything that has happened, but that nothing that happens lies outside God's will - outside God's creative love. An English clergyman said at the death of an infant son, "We do not believe God willed this death. Jesus said 'It is not the will of God that one of these little ones perish.' What we believe is that God will use it, will weave it somehow into a tapestry and that one day we will rejoice to see its beauty."

Paul experienced, in retrospect, the certainty of God's loving hand in life. And so, I think, have you and I. Not at the moment, but later, looking back - the tragedy brought forth a gentle new reality, the door suddenly closed and a possibility opened in another direction. Sickness resulted in a new and better life style.

What Paul was sure of was God's love. Not human faith, human strength, human religion, but God. The whole business, Paul believed, is God's idea. This relationship is God's project. Even faith, Paul suggested, is a product of God's love - God's gentle work in our lives.

That is what predestination means. The Reformation theologians of the 16th century, chief among them, John Calvin, recaptured the old Pauline idea, but they were afflicted with an over-abundance of scholarly logic. If God chooses to save us and if some people don't seem to care, it is logical to deduce that God has chosen not to save them. It's logical. It's the same mentality as Updike's computer hacker who will prove the existence of a God on the basis of human logic. And there have been times when the sons and daughters of Calvin got carried away with this tight logic of their theology and thought they knew exactly who was going to heaven and who wasn't. In centuries past we were saying things like, "By the decree of God, some are predestined to eternal life...and others foreordained to eternal death" which I always thought was the most cheerless religious sentence ever written - unless it is the next sentence to the effect that the number of the saved and damned is "so definite it cannot be either increased or diminished."

Presbyterians don't believe that any longer. It was a case of human logic overriding what the human heart knew about God. It is not what Paul intended.

The Christian Gospel, as St. Paul understood it, is that in Jesus Christ God loves us and that nothing in life will ever separate us from God's love. Further, Paul articulated that haunting suggestion that this God of love, this God whose love for us is so strong nothing can separate us from it, has been at work in our lives, that the love of God has been a quiet reality at every junction, in every major decision, and at every joy and tragedy.

Even our faith, such as it is, we can confess, is God's doing. I find an analogy with the arts helpful. I respond to the beauty of a painting. We respond to the passion and strength of music - involuntarily. It is not uncommon for hair to raise, pulse rate to increase, tears to flow - while experiencing music. The response is called out of us. We don't intend it, particularly. It is a gift from the musician or artist. "Faith begins with a lump in the throat," Frederick Buecnher wrote. Authentic religion is a response to God's love in Jesus Christ, called out of us by God.

To understand that is almost a conversion experience for many of us. We become convinced that religion is a matter of believing right doctrine. Or we are convinced that our salvation is a matter of saying the right words, or going forward at the invitation of the evangelist, or writing a

check and sending in the donation. What a liberating moment when one discovers that the whole matter is God's: that the decision, the intent, the movement is already under way. What a wonderful moment when we look back and know that God has been there, anonymously, quietly moving in my life, to know the authenticity of the assertion the hymn makes when we sing:

"Hast thou not seen
How thy desires have been
Granted in what he ordaineth?"

To confess that is not to feel smug and to exclude others from God's grace. In fact, it is to humbly confess the infinite nature of God's possibilities. It is to entertain the biggest, broadest, theological notion anyone ever had, namely that God's sovereign love ultimately will include all God's children.

More modestly, it is to know that I am who I am, I am in this place, I believe what I believe, not only on my own volition, but because God has been moving through all the days of my life in ways I did not see and could not understand.

That is what Paul regarded as a certainty. That is what he knew for sure. And it comes to us, across twenty centuries, as invitation: not to do a thing, but to know, to rest in the knowledge, to "be" in the certainty that God, in everything, works for good, that nothing will separate you from God's love.

Because he knew that about the past, Paul could look forward to a future that was uncertain at best and gather into one glorious sentence the whole Gospel, the whole mysterious beauty of the Good News. Let it pour down over you like the gentle rain out of heaven, like the water of baptism. Let it give you this day - laughter and hope and certainty.

I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, not height, not depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.